

MARY B. MARCY

Rawls, Neustadt, & Liberal Education

WITHIN THE SPAN OF A YEAR, higher education—and indeed liberal education—lost two of our most prominent practitioners. John Rawls and Richard Neustadt, two scholars whose work provoked new engagement in areas of public policy, political philosophy, political leadership, and the study of government, died between November 2002 and November 2003. Their passing led me to reflect on the ways in which these two exceptional men both advanced and modeled the notion of liberal education.

A Reflection on Two Scholars

As a political scientist who has long since gone over to “the dark side” (moved from a discipline to administration), I have frequently discussed the benefits of liberal education. Like many who read these pages, I think deeply about how to help students develop critical thinking skills, foster a tolerance for ambiguity, and encourage the capacity to make connections across difference. Most of us are involved in this work because the benefits of liberal education are profound, and they are not simply achieved.

While I have been engaging this discussion of liberal education, I have perhaps not applied it so directly to myself. More specifically, like most colleagues I am busy and perhaps too easily lulled into arguing on behalf of liberal education rather than considering its application in my own life. But events cause one to reflect, and with the passing of Rawls and Neustadt, two of the most eminent political scientists of the last half century, I began to realize the influence these scholars had on my world view and professional conduct—an influence that is neither unique to me nor limited to the discipline of political science.

John Rawls and Richard Neustadt were exceptional scholars. They were also, by all accounts, exceptional individuals. I had the opportunity to be exposed to their intellectual leadership in three different ways: as an undergraduate student studying their work, in limited but telling personal interaction as a graduate student, and as a practicing leader in higher education.

John Rawls

Like many undergraduate political science majors, I first encountered John Rawls in assigned reading of his seminal text, *A Theory of Justice*. I did not read with the knowledge that Rawls had changed the profession; I learned that he understood reflection, empathy, and engaged intellectualism. There is something compelling, even redemptive, about Rawls’s notion of justice not only to practicing scholars, but to students just beginning to wrestle with complex thought. Af-

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ter all, here was a thinker willing to discuss how we might create a just society, not simply take another analytical thrust at Kant.

For undergraduates of a certain age, still struggling with identity, the elegant structure of Rawls's proposition was as seductive as his final argument. Imagine, suggested Rawls, that in order to create a just society all citizens who are to be members are placed in the original position behind the "veil of ignorance." These individuals have reasoning skills and intelligence. The key factor in their position behind the veil of ignorance is that they do not know what position they might assume in this just society; they could be a person of color or not, male or female, skilled or unskilled, straight or gay. If they do not know their identity in this new society, Rawls argued, they would create a society that was just to all citizens regardless of accidents of birth. In fact, Rawls went on, from behind the veil of ignorance citizens would create a society that maximized the minimum position: a society that allowed for difference and excellence, but

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ensured quality of life for those least advantaged.

Like most political science students, I went on to study the more arcane permutations of Rawls's vision and to argue occasionally in support of—and occasionally in opposition to—his conclusions. In retrospect, what I now find most intriguing about Rawls's work, aside from his profound contribution to the profession, is his ability to create a structure that invites the marriage of intellectual thought and empathy.

My next encounter with John Rawls was in graduate school. Graduate work at Oxford offered many privileges, and one was the opportunity to hear Rawls speak while he was visiting the university. I do not remember many details of the paper he read that day or specifics of the discussion which followed. What I do remember is a gentle, almost shy, patrician who had long since made his reputation in academe and who wanted nothing more than to have an active intellectual discussion. The most eminent scholar in the room, in his casual reading and conversation, he was filled with curiosity rather than answers. He



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took questions but became enlivened when he could think through an idea with the audience. There was no difference in his response to an unknown graduate student or to an Oxford professor, he responded to all equally and with interest. Nearing his seventies, he was the model of the active and trained mind at work.

My encounters with Rawls as a professional have been more through his theory, and yet somehow equally satisfying. I have found his ideas are not only a complex representation of political thought but also usefully adaptable to notions of relationships, community, and society. I have used Rawls's construct for thinking about a just society to inaugurate courses, to begin work with new communities, and to tease out the values behind entrenched positions within a group. When I teach upper-level political science courses, I frequently use Rawls to invite the students to consider the type of society they want to create. When I attended the Aspen Institute, our leaders used Rawls as a template for how we would construct our week's conversation. When

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I helped launch my work with the Project on the Future of Higher Education, we used Rawls to think about what an ideal college or university might look like.

Rawls is not endlessly adaptable, nor is his theory without flaws. What he did model was reflection, engagement, and a passion for justice. He created tools that contribute immeasurably to the discipline, and yet reach beyond the discipline and invite us to think in new ways about larger challenges in our

world.

Richard Neustadt

Because Richard Neustadt also wrote a seminal work—in this case, a book called *Presidential Power*—I was also, as an undergraduate in political science, introduced to his ideas. Unlike Rawls, Neustadt was not discussing theory, but dealing directly with active contemporary political issues. He addressed the most visible and salient aspect of American politics, the role of the president. As a neophyte to political science, and as a typical middle-American adolescent



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who had been raised on the media's interpretation of political events and therefore raised implicitly on the imperial presidency, I found Neustadt's analysis of presidential authority to be a revelation. I was not alone. My graduate advisor was fond of saying that if there was a Nobel Prize for political science, Neustadt would have been among the first recipients.

Neustadt had the insight, indeed the temerity, to consider the most visible role in American society and suggest that the position had little outright authority. Presidential power, Neustadt argued, was quite limited if one looked at the authority granted to the office by the Constitution and was also consciously checked by the balance of power among the other branches of government. Add to these limited outright powers the specter of ongoing elections, and the result is a position that has little structurally granted authority. The real power of the president, Neustadt proclaimed, was not constitutionally granted, but was quite simply the power of persuasion. A president could lead only if he could compel others to follow, be they in Congress, the courts, the United Nations, or in the American populace. Such a nuanced vision of leadership was not only new to political science, but also offered a dramatically altered way of looking at the world for undergraduates who were just beginning to understand the subtleties of leadership

and the dangers of outright authority.

As a graduate student, I also had the opportunity to meet Richard Neustadt, albeit very briefly. The setting was less structured than my encounter with Rawls, but no less powerful for its informality. Neustadt was married to Shirley Williams, a well-known British politician, and they maintained homes and lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Because I was a graduate student at Oxford, and because my dissertation research considered women in elective office, Ms. Williams had agreed to provide an interview to advance my research. She suggested, in the intimidatingly casual way of many eminent personages, that I come to her flat in London for the interview. Of course I agreed, and after checking my recording equipment numerous times, not to mention checking my attire, I caught the coach to London and duly arrived at the appointed time. I knew Shirley Williams was married to Richard Neustadt, but since he maintained an appointment at Harvard, I assumed I would only meet her. This prospect was daunting enough, for it was one of the first interviews I undertook for my research, and I was still in awe of the responsibilities and opportunities Oxford afforded.

I was therefore somewhat surprised to be greeted at the door by Neustadt himself. Ms. Williams was late returning from another meeting, but he was quite willing to chat while we waited for her return. Cursing myself for not having reread *Presidential Power* on the way to London, I pulled up a chair. "What," Neustadt queried, "are they teaching at Oxford these days?" The answer, of course, at least in the American politics curriculum, was Richard Neustadt. But that response seemed a bit precious, and I didn't venture to offer it. His amused but gentle manner suggested that he knew I was somewhat overwhelmed, and, as he must have done with many a graduate student at Harvard, he managed to make me comfortable by asking about my work—as if a fledgling scholar still learning the discipline was of the utmost interest to him. We talked about why I chose my particular area of research, some of the relevant texts, and what I hoped to accomplish in my dissertation. Eventually, Shirley Williams arrived, looking somewhat less threatening to me since I had already met her husband. She proceeded to give me an insightful and very helpful interview.

For a long time I was frustrated that my awe did not allow me to take advantage of my en-

counter with Richard Neustadt. Why hadn't I asked him to talk about the many U.S. Presidents he knew? Why hadn't I explored his thoughts on the changing role of presidential leadership, or asked him about the fortunes of the Kennedy School, which he helped found? Surely, these were more interesting topics than my graduate thesis.

In reality, I was unlikely to have asked him anything he had not been asked numerous times by others. And I have come to appreciate the personal generosity and intellectual curiosity that would lead someone like Richard Neustadt to inquire with genuine interest about emerging graduate research. His attitude implied that he was always exploring, and always wanted to know what new ideas were being examined in the field. And he also displayed a remarkable sensitivity to a somewhat overwhelmed graduate student.

Neustadt's groundbreaking work on presidential power continues to be a subject of discussion when I teach political science courses, and it continues to have resonance for contemporary students. But it is as a university administrator that, as a professional, I have most fully used Neustadt's insights. As I have watched campus presidents wrestle with issues of shared governance, tenure, accountability, academic quality, and fund-raising—and indeed as I have engaged some of these issues myself—I have often reflected on the relevance of Neustadt's notions of power. It is not only the U.S. president whose primary power is the power of persuasion. The power of persuasion, rather than coercion, may be the most relevant power any effective leader can employ.

From all accounts, Neustadt and Rawls were very different in style and personality. Neustadt advised presidents and helped found the Kennedy School of Government; Rawls was known to be self-effacing and not always eager



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even as a speaker. Yet each in his own way was the embodiment of liberal learning: intellectually engaged, personally generous, more likely to look for questions than assume answers. Like many others, I am grateful for their contributions as leaders, as scholars, and as individuals. While we are lessened by their passing, all who care about liberal education will continue to be enriched by their legacy. □

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